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Medicine, Health, and Culture

ANTH 4330 / 5325 Spring 2025

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Office Hours: by appointment, NAH 305

Class time: Thursday 10:30 am – 1:15pm
Location: NAH 401

Course Description

Welcome! This course examines health, illness, and care from an anthropological perspective, serving as an introduction to medical anthropology (or health anthropology, as it is sometimes called today). You will learn about various medical traditions, technologies, and practices in different parts of the world. We will ask and debate many difficult questions: How does culture shape the representations and experiences of illness? Is modern medicine also cultural? Should people have a right to choose a treatment from alternative medical traditions, even if these traditions are not “evidence-based”? Can genetic technology make us healthier? Who should be responsible for your health: yourself, the government, private companies? We will also direct our attention to the culture, economy, and politics of modern medicine by examining the ideologies of science, the role of governments, pharmaceutical companies, as well as one’s citizenship, class, gender, and race in experiences of health and suffering, provision of care, and access to medical resources. The themes of health inequality, structural violence, global health, and mental health will be central to our discussions throughout the course.

Course format

As this is a 4000-level UG course cross-coded with an MA course, it is a challenging one. There will be many readings, including three ethnographic books, and four written assignments. There will be no long lectures and separate tutorials. Instead, it is more of an interactive seminar with

sharing sessions and discussions. Therefore, I expect you to come to class having read all assigned readings and with prepared discussion questions.

Expected Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- describe the history and major theoretical orientations of medical anthropology;
- explain the diversity of health-related beliefs, systems of medical knowledge, and practices across different cultures and societies;
- analyze the interactions between biological, cultural, and social factors in the shaping of health-related experiences
- analyze the structures of political and economic power that influence the availability, affordability, and desirability of medical resources
- apply the knowledge acquired from readings and class discussions to the analysis of real-world situations, such as genetic testing, medical pluralism, pharmaceuticalization, and medical knowledge production

Learning Material

All readings will be available on Blackboard, but you may want to purchase hard copies of the following textbooks:

- The Routledge Handbook of Medical Anthropology (2016), edited by Lenore Manderson, Elizabeth Cartwright, and Anita Hardon – referred to as *Handbook*
- Mei Zhan. 2009. *Other-Worldly: Making Chinese Medicine through Transnational Frames*. Duke University Press
- Alvaro Jarrín. 2017. *The Biopolitics of Beauty: Cosmetic Citizenship and Affective Capital in Brazil*. University of California Press

Additional resources:

Textbooks and readers:

- Good, Byron. 1994. *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press
- Peter Brown and Ron Barret. *Understanding and Applying Medical Anthropology*. Third Edition. Left Coast Press

Major academic journals in medical anthropology:

- Medical Anthropology Quarterly
- Medical Anthropology
- Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry
- Anthropology & Medicine
- Medical Anthropology Theory
- Social Sciences & Medicine
- Transcultural Psychiatry

Online resources:

- The Society for Medical Anthropology (<https://medanthro.net>) – the website of the professional associations of medical anthropologists under the American Anthropological Association

- Medical Anthropology Europe (<https://www.easaonline.org/networks/medical/>) – the website of the medical anthropology network under the European Association of Medical Anthropologists
- Medical Anthropology Young Scholars (<https://mayseasa.org/>) – the website of the young scholar wing of the Medical Anthropology Europe
- IASTAM The International Association for the Study of Traditional Asian Medicine (<http://iastam.org/>)
- Asian Society for the History of Medicine (https://www.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/~medicine/ashm/en_index.htm)
- Somatosphere (<http://somatosphere.net>) - the most influential medical anthropology blog

Assessment Criteria

Short essays – 25 % each

There is no term paper. Instead, you will be required to write four short essays: three of them are traditional essays, based on literature review, ethnographic interviews and media analysis, and one is a photo-essay, involving an auto-ethnographic approach. The written essays must be 1000 words each (+-100 words), excluding bibliography, and a photo-essay must include 10 photos with 100-word descriptions and a 150-word introduction and a 100-word conclusion.

In each essay, UG students must cite at least three class readings, while MA students must cite four class readings. Class readings comprise readings in this syllabus or any chapter from *The Routledge Handbook of Medical Anthropology*. Please, note, that you need to cite new sets of readings each time, which means you cannot rely on the same class readings for all four essays.

1) Reading response

Choose one week to write a critical response to the assigned readings: provide an overview of the main themes of the readings, their similar or different approaches, ethnographic scope, timeliness and significance. What the key concerns raised by the scholars? What material and methods have they used? Why are these studies important? What have caught your attention? Why? How do these readings resonate with your life, contemporary Hong Kong or the world broadly? You must also include five questions you would like to ask your classmates about these readings.

(graded paper) Due in class, in the chosen week

(ungraded) Share your response in class

2) In Genes We Trust

Write a critical analysis of any type of genetic testing: an ancestry test such as 23andMe, prenatal genetic screening such as NIPT, a genetic testing for a rare condition, etc. How recent is this technology? Who runs it? How expensive is it? How easily available is it? Who owns the data? Then, review how this form of testing is represented by in social media discussions in a specific cultural context, such as Hong Kong, mainland China, or another place. What are the main concerns and comments raised about this genetic technology in local social media? Include specific quotes from comments and posts. A link to a media article and screenshots of social media discussions must be attached. You should use one concept from course readings or lectures to advance your analysis.

(graded paper) Due: week 5 in class

(ungraded) 3-4 students can sign up to share their findings in class

3) Medical Choices

Write a paper based on an interview with a family member or a friend who has experienced any kind of illness and tried multiple options to cure it. You should use the concept of *medical plurality* to analyze their experience. The aim of this paper is to describe the content of the interview and provide an analysis of decision-making as grounded in a specific cultural context: how do people choose medical treatment, what is their first choice, why do they decide to try another medical treatment, who and what influences their decisions, what kind of values and meanings do they attach to different medical approaches? The short paper should include direct quotes from the interview.

An ethnographic interview should last about an hour and include questions about the interviewee's background and life experiences. An interview script must be attached (but it is not graded).

(graded paper) Due: week 9 in class

(ungraded) 3-4 students can sign up to share their findings

4) Magic Pills

Photo-essay: take photos of medications or health supplements that you use. Analyze them in terms of their economic value, symbolic meaning, cultural associations, taste, perceived efficacy, etc. When did you buy these pills or where did you get them? Why? How long have you been using them? When do you expect to stop them? Do you trust them? Do you feel anxious if you forget to take them? Reflect on the power and agency of the pills. Reflect on the pharmaceutical companies that produce them and their marketing strategies.

You should engage with at least one class concept to aid your analysis.

(graded paper) Due: week 13 in class

(ungraded) 3-4 students can sign up to share their stories

Grading scale and criteria

Grade	%	Written assignments
A	95-100	Your writing is original, nuanced, well-structured, clear, and factually correct; your analysis and arguments are convincing and well-situated in the literature, engaging with class readings and concepts. Everything is of the required length and format and submitted on time.
A -	90-94	Your writing is original, nuanced, well-structured, clear, and factual; your analysis and arguments are convincing but may occasionally contain minor issues. It is well situated in the literature, engaging with class readings and concepts, with minor confusion. Everything is of the required length and format and submitted on time
B+	85-89	Your writing demonstrates an overall good grasp of concepts and theories, but occasionally lacks clarity, contains several minor errors, and / or slightly deviates from the required length and format. It is original and submitted on time.

B	80-84	Your writing demonstrates an overall good grasp of concepts and theories, but occasionally lacks clarity, contains many minor issues or factual errors, and / or deviates from required length and format. Everything is submitted on time and is original, although there might be minor problems with citations and attribution.
B -	75-79	Your writing demonstrates an overall good grasp of concepts and theories, but lacks clarity, contains minor errors and a few major logical flaws, and / or deviates from required length and format. Everything is submitted on time and is original, although there might be minor problems with citations and attribution
C +	70-74	Your writing shows an acceptable level of understanding of class material, but it lacks clarity, contains many major factual errors and logical flaws, and/or often deviates from the required length and format. The assignments are submitted on time or a day late. The work is original, although there are serious problems with citations and attribution
C	65-69	Your writing shows an acceptable level of understanding of class material, but it lacks clarity, contains many major factual errors and logical flaws, and does not follow the required length and format. The assignments are submitted on time or a day late. The work is original, although there are major problems with citations and attribution
C -	60-64	Your writing shows an acceptable level of understanding of class material, but it lacks clarity, contains many major factual errors and logical flaws, and does not follow the required length and format. The work is submitted a day or two late. It is original, although there are serious problems with citations and attribution
D +	55-59	Your writing shows a minimal understanding of concepts and theories. It lacks effort, is hard to read and understand, contains significant errors, flaws, and biased viewpoints. The work is original, but citations are absent. It considerably deviates from the required length and format (answers are too short), and/or are submitted a few days late
D	50-54	Your writing shows a minimal understanding of concepts and theories. It lacks effort, is hard to read and understand, and contains significant errors, flaws, and biased viewpoints. The work is original, but citations are absent. It considerably deviates from the required length and format (too short), and submitted many days late
F	0	Your writing is submitted more than a week late or not submitted at all. The work is extremely short, factually incorrect, biased, and/or contains instances of plagiarism

Weekly schedule

*Subject to change. Stay tuned on Blackboard

1. January 9: Introduction to the Course

- Lenore Manderson, Elizabeth Cartwright and Anita Hardon. Introduction: Sign Posts. In *Handbook*

2. January 16: Beginnings and Endings

- Handbook Chapter 2: Changing Childhoods:
 - Christine Dedding: Children with Diabetes
 - Alice Larotonda: Rare diseases in children in Italy
 - Vu Song Ha” Autism spectrum disorders in Vietnam
 - Ria Reis: Children’s Idioms of Distress
- Handbook Chapter 9: Endings
 - Becoming Old and Frail in Coastal Tanzania
 - Alzheimer’s Disease in Urban Brazil
 - Caring for Corpses in Singapore

3. January 23. Sex, Body, Genes, and Technology

- Handbook Chapter 3: Sexuality and Technology:
 - Panoopat Poompruek, Pimpawun Boonmongkon and Thomas Guadamuz. Feminizing the body
 - Arianna Huhn. Body, sex, and diet in Mozambique
 - Empowerment and the Use of Vaginal Microbicides
 - Sebastian Mohr: Donating Semen in Denmark
- Handbook Chapter 14: Genes, Kinship, and Risk:
 - Suli Sui and Margaret Sleeboom-Faulkner. Direct-to-consumer genetic testing in China
 - Harvesting Umbilical Cord Blood
 - Janice McLaughlin. Genetics, childhood development, and kinship
 - Suicide and the Epigenetic Turn
 - Techno-Benefits and Social Risks

4. February 6. Ups and Downs of Living

- Handbook Chapter 5: Stress in Everyday Life:
 - A cold of the soul
 - Psychoanalysis in Buenos Aires
 - Promoting smoking in Indonesia
- Handbook Chapter 6: Bodily Resistances:
 - Megan Warin. Relatedness in anorexia
 - Megan Wainwright. Rebellion and co-morbidity
 - Jussica Mulligan. Governing by complaint

- Kenworthy, N. (2021), Like a Grinding Stone: How Crowdfunding Platforms Create, Perpetuate, and Value Health Inequities. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 35: 327-345. <https://doi.org/10.1111/maq.12639>
- BONILLA, Y. and ROSA, J. (2015), #Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States. *American Ethnologist*, 42: 4-17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12112>

5. February 13. The State, Biopolitics, and the Self

- Alvaro Jarrín. 2017. *The Biopolitics of Beauty*. Introduction: The Biopolitical and Affective Dimensions of Beauty
- Jarrín, Chapter 1: The Eugenesis of Beauty
- Jarrín, Chapter 2: Plastic Governmentality
- Jarrín, Chapter 3: The Circulation of Beauty

6. February 20. Racialization, Economic Hierarchies, and Citizenship

- Jarrín, Chapter 4: Hope, Affect, Mobility
- Jarrín, Chapter 5: The Raciology of Beauty
- Jarrín, Chapter 6: Cosmetic Citizens
- Jarrín, Conclusion: Thinking of Beauty Transnationally

7. February 27. Finding Care in a Changing World

- Handbook Chapter 8: Ways of Caring
 - Hilde Thygesen and Jeanette Pols. Care, self-management and the webcam
 - Tanja Ahlin. E-care in Kerala
 - Gesine Kuspert Hearn. Illnesses without a cause
- Handbook Chapter 12: Global Quests for Care:
 - Medical travel
 - Health care along the US/Mexico border
 - “I haven’t paid this karma yet”

8. March 13. Medical Plurality and Entanglements

- Mei Zhan. 2009. *Other-Worldly*: Introduction
- Zhan. Chapter 1: Get on Track with the World
- Zhan. Chapter 2: Hands, Hearts, and Dreams
- Zhan. Chapter 3: Does It Take a Miracle?

9. March 20. Negotiating knowledge, tradition, and culture

- Zhan. Chapter 4: Translating Knowledges
- Zhan. Chapter 5: Engendering Families and Knowledges, Sideways
- Zhan. Chapter 6: Discrepant Distances
- Zhan. Epilogue

10. March 27. Medicalization, Phramaceuticalization, and Agency

- Handbook Chapter 7: Chronicities of Illness:
 - Mass drug administration for neglected tropical diseases
 - Diagnosis and the Punctuated Life-Course
 - Amputated Identity
 - Facing up to breathlessness
- Handbook Chapter 10:
 - Emilia Sanabria. The Compounding pharmacy in Brazil
 - Julia Hornberger. Policing ‘counterfeit medication.’
 - Laurent Pordie. How a lifestyle product became a pharmaceutical specialty
 - Alice Desclaux. Cosmopolitan phyto remedies in Senegal
- Jerome W. Crowder, Elizabeth Cartwright (2021) Thinking through the Photo Essay: Observations for Medical Anthropology. In *Medicine Anthropology Theory*, April 23, <https://www.medanthrotheory.org/article/view/5110/7440>

11. April 3. Morality, Ideology, and Medical Industry

- Khalikova, Venera. Introduction
- Khalikova, Venera. Chapter 1
- Khalikova, Venera. Chapter 2

12. April 10. Doctors, Patients, and the Nation

- Khalikova, Venera. Chapter 3
- Khalikova, Venera. Chapter 4
- Khalikova, Venera. Chapter 5
- Khalikova, Venera. Conclusion

13. April 17. Globalization and the Future

- Handbook, Chapter 15: How the logic of biomedical practice travel:
 - Humanistic Obstetrics in Brazil
 - Enterprenuering Barren Grounds
 - Surgery and the Cultural Politics of Global Health
 - ‘Safe Burials’ and the 2014-2015 Ebola Outbreak in Sierra Leone
 - Doctors Without Borders and the Global Emergency
- Handbook, Chapter 16: Vital signs. Medical anthropology in the 21st century

Course Policies and Support

Contacting me

Use your CUHK email (not your personal email), when communicating about class matters. For most situations, you should write to the class RA first—they are very knowledgeable and ready to help you. But feel free to email me as well, if there is something that the RA does not know, or if you want to contact me directly. I will do my best to answer your email within 24 hours, with an understandable exception of weekends and public holidays.

Educational technology

This class relies on the use of Blackboard. All class communications, announcements, assignment guidelines, and homework submissions will be done through Blackboard. Note that Blackboard uses the email address assigned to you by the University, so it is your responsibility to have an electronic mail forwarded to your primary email address.

Each written assignment should be run through VeriGuide

Academic Integrity

The University has recently updated its policy on Academic Integrity and the penalties for plagiarism and cheating: http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/Eng_hm_files_%282013-14%29/p06.htm

Read it carefully: every student is expected to comply with the policy; otherwise, if you are suspected of violating these obligations, you will be subject to the outlined sanctions. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to ask me or your TA about this!

The use of generative AI is not allowed for written assignments.

Special accommodation

If you need special accommodations or classroom modifications, you need to notify both me and the University's Wellness and Counselling Center (<https://www2.osa.cuhk.edu.hk/disability/en-GB>) no later than the third week of class.

Classroom Recording

To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, **you may not record** our discussions and activities during the class without my permission obtained in advance, and only solely for your own private use. Typically, PowerPoint slides will be uploaded to Blackboard and available for review. For days, when the class cannot meet, a lecture will be pre-recorded and posted to Blackboard.

Late Work and Absence

Late or incomplete assignments will be marked down: a full grade will be subtracted **for each late day**. Class attendance is not required, but if you miss a class, it is your responsibility to copy class notes and go over the PowerPoint presentations; otherwise, it will most likely result in poor understanding of class material and, ultimately, in a low grade. You are welcome to talk to me during office hours to go over the missed lectures!

Discussion Rules

We will discuss many interesting, important and potentially controversial topics. I expect you to be **polite and respectful** of your classmates' opinions, limit your statements to academic (not emotional) arguments, and not use offensive language or judgmental statements.

Grade Review

If you want to discuss your grade, you can send me an email to set up an appointment during my office hours when we will go over your work and decide on a grade together. During this process, I can both mark your original grade up, if you demonstrate evidence that you know the material well, or mark it down.

Independent Learning Center

If you need help with communication and learning skills, the University has an excellent resource for you. You can schedule a consultation or attend workshops on various strategies for improving learning outcomes <https://www.ilc.cuhk.edu.hk/EN/mission.aspx>